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What do HRD scholars and practitioners need to know about power, emotion and HRD?

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Abstract

In this essay, written for the 25th anniversary volume of HRDQ, I have been invited to focus on emotion and power in the context of HRD. It is hoped that my essay will help to inform and to stimulate the future flow of manuscripts in this area. The starting point of a better understanding of the interplay between emotion, power and HRD is a simple rule: *development is beset with contradictions*. For example, our attempts to transform can often contribute to things remaining the same; our efforts to facilitate change may well inhibit it; and our strategies to empower individuals may contribute to the establishment of forms of compliance and control. I argue that a better understanding of the contradictions that are integral to HRD will lead to improvements in the design and implementation of learning and development practices within the messy, complicated and power filled world of organizations.

Keywords: emotion, power, contradiction, human resource development

Introduction

In this essay, written for the 25th anniversary volume of HRDQ, I have been invited to focus on emotion and power in the context of HRD (which is a consistent underlying theme of my own research and writing). My brief is to provide a ‘provocative’ discussion of this topic and it is hoped that my essay will help to inform and to stimulate the future flow of manuscripts in this area.

The starting point of a better understanding of the interplay between emotion, power and HRD is a simple rule: *development is beset with contradictions*. Any method for development, no matter how convinced we are of its efficacy, is tied to organizational power relations and their effects. Power relations create contradictions in how learning, training, mentoring, appraising (etc.) are done and experienced. HRD is often been concerned with the ways in which transformations arising from individual development can influence changes in organizational practice. My argument in this essay is that we need to extend HRD research and practice by critically engaging with the ways in which emotions and power relations undermine the possibility of such transformations. To put it a different way, our attempts to transform can often contribute to things remaining the same; our efforts to facilitate change may well inhibit it; and our strategies to empower individuals may contribute to the establishment of forms of compliance and control.

It is important to be aware that there is always a tension between the *radical potential* of HRD to make change happen and the *political purpose* behind the use of HRD in organizations, which may be to do with control. If we are capable of recognizing the tension between radical potential and political purpose then we can begin to perceive a more general issue, which is that in addition to advancing the possible (positive) effects of HRD in organizations, we can also begin to comprehend the impact of organization on HRD. I argue that a better understanding of the contradictions that are integral to development will lead to improvements in the design and implementation of learning and development practices within the messy, complicated and power filled world of organizations.

Before I discuss and illustrate the importance of contradictions in HRD, I want to clarify what I mean by the terms power and emotion.

What I Mean by Power

When I speak of ‘power’ I am talking about a range of different forces or dynamics that are integral to peoples’ experiences and to organizing processes. These dynamics are within the individual, between the self and others, they are generated in groups, and they inform, create and constrain organizational behaviour, structure and action. (For a comprehensive discussion of power and organizations I would recommend: Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips, 2006. For a review and conceptualisation of how organizational power functions see: Fleming and Spicer, 2014). I am by no means providing a complete picture of these complex and ever-present forces.

Power is an embodied force that is part of our everyday selves. We carry power with us in our relations, in our experiences and in our conscience. For example, when a person shouts ‘hey you’ at us from behind we turn and think ‘what do they want?’ When a policeman shouts ‘hey you’ at us we think ‘what have I done wrong?’ In this sense we are subject to power, it defines the conditions underlying how we experience ourselves as people (Fleming and Spicer, 2014).

Power is implicit within interpersonal relations. For example, hierarchies are present in organizations and these are both real and imagined. They are real because there are different positions in organizations (often called things like ‘senior’, ‘middle’ or ‘front line’) suggesting different skills, capabilities and opportunities to influence. They are imagined because we invest others with more influence (and capability) than they actually have; with more influence than we have (even if they don’t); and with opportunities that we do not have (even if we do).

Power is present in organizations as a result of social power relations – the differences of class, gender or race that make a difference to our everyday feelings and behaviour at work. It is in the many attempts to avoid difference that power relations are revealed. For example, the white manager who is reluctant to assess a black member of his team for fear of being accused of racism has already perpetuated what he was seeking to avoid.

Power is generated through behaviour within and between groups. For example, the behaviour that informs feelings of security in ‘my group’ also underpins feelings of suspicion and blame of ‘other’ groups, which reinforce difficulties of communication

across group boundaries. Such differences and divisions can be seen in the tensions between professional and managerial roles, as well as the ways in which these divisions are reinforced through emotion, language, status, attempts at control and patterns of blame.

Power is an over-arching organizational force arising from the interplay between structure and agency. Our behaviour and our actions create ways of working that shape ‘how we do things here’. These ways of working, or ‘dispositions’ (Voronov and Vince, 2012) constrain action, limit behaviour and discourage change at the same time as providing the rules, routines and habits that make creative and transformational action possible. We create and collude in the webs that constrain us, yet we are also capable of artfully navigating these webs in order to make change happen.

What I Mean by Emotion

When I speak of ‘emotion’ I am not primarily talking about what an individual feels. If we want to understand the role of emotions in learning and development, then it is important to emphasise the relational and inter-subjective dynamics of emotion more than intra-personal feelings. In practice, what this means for HRD is less of an emphasis on personal development (making a better, more capable person). It means more of an emphasis on how development is shaped and avoided by on-going relations between self and other, as well as how such relations are connected to broader organizational dynamics (bringing the emotional world of organizations alive as a context for development). There are a number of ideas and approaches that can help us to bring the emotional world of organizations alive in the service of HRD.

A psychosocial theory of emotions in organizations recognizes that ‘the social is psychologically invested and the psychological is socially formed, neither has an essence apart from the other. Just as we need a theory of how ‘otherness’ enters what is usually taken as the ‘self’, so we need concepts which will address the ways in which what is ‘subjective’ is also found out there’ (Frosh, 2003: 1555). An emphasis on the psychological acknowledges that individuals are products of anxiety and desire provoking life events; an emphasis on the social recognizes that defenses against anxiety and desire are attached to material conditions and discourses, to inter-subjective processes, and to real events in the social world (Hollway, 2006).

Emotions are generated, reinforced and transformed in relation to others and they are integral to the continuous process of negotiating systemic order (Voronov, 2014). Emotions and power relations are closely linked. For example, projective processes between leaders and followers have political effects: ‘No leader is immune from taking actions that (even if well-intentioned) can lead to destructive consequences, and no follower is immune from being an active participant in the process’ (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 2011: 390). Our ability to engage emotionally with the messy world of organizations comes from learning when and how to take the risk to interpret and give voice to what is going on; to reflect on behaviour with others, in public (Raelin, 2001). One of the problems that HRD can address is that there are times when we clearly see the world around us in organizations, but prefer not to notice it because of the emotions that are stimulated (Vince, 2010).

We need to include the unconscious in our understanding of emotion (and power). The idea of ‘unconscious’ is paradoxical. It ‘is inferred from an analysis of features in human behaviour... which cannot be understood except on the hypothesis that there is an unconscious’ (Easthope, 1999: 4). In addition, ‘there is no data that can establish the truth of the unconscious because *the unconscious ruins the possibility of actual knowledge* (my emphasis) – it calls everything into question’ (Frosh, 2002: 12). The unconscious helps us to recognize that ‘the truth of what is being talked about is not *necessarily* important (original emphasis) – the fantasies, dreams and imaginings... do matter, *and they enable the growth of understanding*’ (my emphasis) (Craib, 2001: 23).

The fantasies that organizations mobilize are important in setting emotional and political boundaries. For example, Levine (2003), in exploring organizational commitment to diversity, identifies a ‘fantasy of the organization as the peaceable kingdom. In this fantasy, cultural differences and the group identities through which they exist do not foster bias-related behavior. The organization becomes the community of the diverse, the place where they live together peaceably. In the peaceable kingdom, ethnic, racial, gender, religious and class differences do not promote bias-related behaviors, as of course they have through much of human history’ (Levine, 2003: 283). The fantasy of a peaceable kingdom imagines an organizational community brought together by a diverse (and therefore creative) workforce. It is a fantasy that discourages the idea that differences are integral to group identities and that such differences are often implicitly mobilized in the service of the organization.

Collective processes of fantasy are bound up with the reproduction of social structure and with systems of domination (Voronov and Vince, 2012) so that the constructed world that surrounds and is within us seems natural and obvious to the degree that it would be unlikely that we would want to change it. The notion of an organization as a ‘peaceable kingdom’ is not solely a fantasy in the sense that it helps to avoid differences arising from (e.g.) race and gender, and the potential conflicts that might arise from them. Fantasy here is a process that controls difference; thereby ensuring that ‘peacefulness’ becomes a dominant disposition, a mechanism to control what difference means.

Emotional intelligence is a contradiction in terms. It is important to accept that our attempts to reason with, control, understand and manage emotion are limited. My own view is that writing intelligently about emotion is the opposite of writing about emotional intelligence. In part this is because I think that any attempt to understand emotions rationally is just as likely to mobilise the irrational, as well as representing and connecting with the power relations that characterise ‘the way we do things here’. The contradictory nature of emotions in organizations means that (e.g.) self-awareness may at times be the same as self-deception; emotion management and regulation may contribute to the avoidance of change; and being well-tuned to the emotions of others may involve putting them in our shoes rather than trying to put ourselves into theirs.

The HRD community is in a good position to take a lead on encouraging people in organizations to engage with the full range of emotions and politics that influence their roles and relations in order to be able to comprehend the dynamics that affect

these roles and relations. This perspective implies a shift, for example, from seeking to create ‘better leaders’ to creating a better appreciation of the emotional and political context of leadership in action. This will involve taking the risk to interpret the projective dynamics that are connected to the leader’s unwanted self; as well as understanding how these dynamics pull leaders towards those underlying emotions (denial, defensiveness, anxiety, etc.) that help to structure the status quo and place limits on development (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012).

Contradictions in Development

In organizations (and therefore in approaches to the development of organizational members, practices or processes) underlying emotions and power relations are visible in the tensions or contradictions that occur between attempts to control and attempts to change. Such contradictions are an integral aspect of (e.g.) leadership roles. Leaders and managers are often expected to be (at the same time) both the champions of change and the guardians of the status quo in organizations. Such tensions are inevitably part of any attempts we make to develop individuals and to promote organizational learning. I believe that our tendency as HRD scholars and practitioners has been to try and ignore these contradictions. My view is that it is important to acknowledge the contradictions that are part of our attempts to deliver HRD and to allow them to inform our practice and to enrich it.

Emotions and power relations shape how people are able to develop and transform practice. All attempts to organize learning and development are prone to the creation of activities that are potentially self-limiting as well as developmental. It is recognised that HRD has a continuing role in ‘enhancing the learning capacity of both individuals and organizations themselves’ (Russ-Eft et al, 2014). However, the emotional and political contexts within which individual and organizational learning take place are always likely to *both* promote and prevent learning. I have spoken about this elsewhere as the difference between ‘learning-in-action’ and ‘learning inaction’ (Vince, 2008).

Development strategies and approaches are primarily designed to mobilise ‘learning-in-action’ – enhancing individuals’ ability to develop strategic actions that can be tested in ways that help to transform practice. However, attempts at development may also give rise to ‘learning inaction’ – our (conscious and unconscious) awareness or knowledge of when it is emotionally and politically expedient to refrain from action, when to avoid collective action and the organizational dynamics that inform a failure to act. It is important to be aware that power can be exercised so as not to achieve a desired goal (Fleming and Spicer, 2014) and that learning and development may be complicit in this process. In developing ideas and practice for HRD we need to recognise that our strategies and approaches may contribute to ways of working that reduce learning capacity and that help to restrict or over-simplify what can be learned.

An Example¹:

Not so long ago I completed a six-month research project on ‘Power-sharing Between Clinicians and Managers in the National Health Service (NHS)’ (Sinha, Canter and

¹ This example is taken from Vince, 2012

Vince, 2011). When I started the research I was convinced that it might generate knowledge about how to support power sharing between clinicians and managers. When the research was completed I realized that the differences between clinicians and managers are a significant part of the glue that holds the management and leadership of the UK Health Service together.

The research was organized around six-month ‘leadership fellowships’, which were available to both clinicians and managers. Over the six-month period, clinicians and managers worked on specific quality improvement projects. The data were collected in a variety of ways – including both individual and group interviews and observations. In Table 1 (below) I have provided a short extract of clinicians and managers’ perceptions of each other.

Table 1: NHS Clinicians and Managers views of each other

Clinicians view of Managers	Managers view of Clinicians
<p><i>“Managers see us like babies in prams – throwing their toys around and fussing around. Managers then become those adults who are rational and objective while we are the toddlers”</i></p> <p><i>“They [managers] don’t understand that it is emotionally upsetting when due to cost we are not able to provide good services”</i></p> <p><i>“Managers pontificate more and take the theory more seriously than the doctors. This may be due to doctors having more time pressure to act at work rather than theorise!”</i></p>	<p><i>“They [clinicians] feel bureaucracy is wrong and they are moral and right”</i></p> <p><i>“They [clinicians] have a desire to preserve the status quo. They have huge sense of loyalty to their profession when it is challenged. They are happy to criticize themselves amongst themselves but not outside”</i></p> <p><i>“They [clinicians] lack respect for NHS as an institution and hence the Managers”</i></p> <p><i>“They [clinicians] are problem focused but don’t come up with solutions”</i></p>

My reason for sharing this example is in order to point towards the contradictions that emerged from this development project. These included: 1. Both clinicians and managers have an investment in maintaining these views of each other. For example, it is very common to hear that their clinical colleagues see clinicians who have taken on managerial roles as having ‘gone over to the dark side’. Similarly, managers’ see clinicians, even of those who take on managerial roles, as ‘locked into their professional loyalties’. 2. I realized that the statements (like the ones in Table 1) are not complaints about each other, but rather they are an on-going expression of views that serve as implicit rules about behaviour. 3. Once established, these rules are difficult to change – making mutuality, collaborative endeavour and power sharing in the organization more difficult. 4. I am forming the opinion that a strong divide between managers and clinicians is integral to organizing in the NHS. If this is true,

then such a divide has profound implications for learning and development in the NHS.

In effect, such differences, and the tensions they mobilise, challenge the way we think about leadership development in the NHS. The current thinking about leadership development is based on a generic framework of individual skills and knowledge called the ‘leadership framework’. The UK National Leadership Council claim is that the framework ‘is applicable to everyone in health and care, no matter what their discipline, role or function’ and ‘it is designed to enable staff to understand their progression as leaders...’ (NHS National Leadership Council: <http://nhsleadershipframework.rightmanagement.co.uk/what-is-the-lf>)

I do not believe that I am over-emphasizing my point when I say that the claim that there is a framework that is ‘applicable to everyone... no matter what their discipline’ is ridiculous. In my opinion this idea would be ridiculous in relation to any organization, but it is particularly ridiculous when applied to such a large and complex organizational context as the British NHS. A one-size-fits-all approach to development in the NHS is a symptom of a poor understanding of the emotions and politics that inform and underpin attempt to learn about leadership. The current framework does not account for everyday power relations and their consequences for service delivery. It is focused on individual development and takes no notice of the contradictions that are generated within such a highly political context. Such a framework is not designed to engage with power relations that both inform and undermine development. For example, it emphasizes ‘setting direction’, ‘working with others’ and ‘managing services’ without any insight into the fact that managers and leaders in the NHS regularly misdirect, work without others and mismanage the services they are responsible for. If we deny the contradictions that are integral to the practice of leadership then our development processes will only reinforce the problems they are seeking to address.

Emotion, Power and HRD: Building a Contribution

For me, a key issue for future research in HRD will be to build a body of knowledge that highlights the emotional dynamics and power relations that are part of practice. At present, I do not think that there is a particularly large constituency of scholars who are committed to this way of thinking about HRD². I hope that this will change. I hope to review more manuscripts in HRDQ that make a contribution to knowledge within this area.

There are a number of ways in which I can imagine scholars and scholarly practitioners helping to build contributions to knowledge in the area of emotion, power and HRD.

First, I think that it will be important to apply the idea that *development is beset with contradictions* to our HRD scholarship. For example, if we are seeking to identify a range of capabilities that align with organizational values and purpose, then we can

² I would point to the work of (e.g.) Jamie Callahan (Drexel, USA), Carole Elliott (Durham, UK), Kiran Trehan (Birmingham, UK) and Clare Rigg (Tralee, Ireland) as scholars who have consistently contributed to knowledge surrounding emotion, power and HRD.

try to articulate both the creative potential and the political purpose or limitations of such capabilities within their specific context. Having the idea in our minds that contradictions are integral to development can help to embed a process of critical reflection into the design and implementation of learning and development practices. If we ignore contradictions that are part of the political context of organizations then our development processes will only reinforce the problems they are seeking to address.

Two inter-related questions reflect the contradictory nature of the dynamics we need to study. These are: (a) what can the study of emotion, power and HRD tell us about the limits of HRD; and (b) what can the study of the limits of HRD tell us about emotion and power in organizations? Once we are familiar with the limits to development within a political context, then we might be in a position to ask how these limits can be unsettled or disrupted in order to enhance the potential for forms of development that are less likely to mobilize 'learning inaction' (Vince, 2008). These contradictions do not undermine HRD; they have great potential to enhance it.

Second, we can make a contribution to knowledge beyond the idea that individuals' development is the primary focus of our analysis. This will involve considering the extent to which learning and development are themselves attempts to depoliticize power differentials, making them seem natural or beyond question (Vince, 2001). I think that it will be important to reveal and understand the specific micro-practices that reflect the interaction between emotion, power and HRD. For example, this might include a better understanding of: attempts to control others as we pretend to facilitate them; ways of avoiding the conflicts and differences that might make change possible because we fear their effects for us; or how and why we acquiesce to others' bad ideas in order to ensure an easy life. It might involve inquiring into the interplay between petty bureaucracy and HRD, or identifying habits and routines promoted through learning and development that are designed to control or encourage compliance. (There are many more such dynamics to study).

HRD scholarship should help us to recognize that the problems, struggles and issues we associate with individuals may well be a representation of broader power relations in the social context within which we work. I think that studies that contribute to our comprehension of the political dynamics surrounding HRD will have practical value. My view is that they can help organizational members to be more realistic in the development of action and to recognize that all their actions will be bound up with relations of power that both promote and prevent their ability to act.

Third, we can make a contribution to knowledge on emotion in organizations that moves beyond a desire to understand emotions rationally by associating them with intelligence. There are, in my opinion, a more pressing range of issues that connect emotion and HRD. For example, fears and anxieties are an everyday part of organizational life that will not be removed or resolved through the application of emotional intelligence. Our fears of being (e.g.) punished, humiliated, excluded or hated are very real and they underpin our refusal to notice what we are noticing within or around us in the organization. In my experience, such fears and anxieties frequently emerge within the management classroom or other formal settings for learning (Vince 2010 and 2011), often in very indirect ways. Improving how we engage with such dynamics in learning environments is a first step to helping people to connect with

them. Such improvements are unlikely to arise solely as a result of acquiring a better understanding of how we feel (as individuals). The value of learning environments also comes from recognising that feelings that are picked up and internalized by other participants are often the ones we find it difficult to see in ourselves (Vince, 2012).

There are a variety of questions that HRD scholarship can help to answer in relation to emotion in organizations. For example: what are the inter-personal, projective processes that characterise our experience of learning within a specific organizational context, and what are their broader, political effects? How do attempts at development tie us into unconscious relations with others, and how is our 'unwanted self' (Petriglieri and Stein 2012) projected onto others from our organizational roles? We also need to know more about the fantasies that organizations mobilize in order to set emotional and political boundaries. We can start to do this by interrogating fantasies connected to development. One fantasy that I find to be common in learning environments is that, when we learn together, 'we are all in the same boat'. Emphasizing the equality inherent in learning with and from our peers is productive, but it also allows individuals to avoid the differences that are present in learning. In this way, both individuals and groups unconsciously defend against the differences (e.g. of power, knowledge, understanding, enthusiasm, gender, social and cultural diversity) that are inevitably part of learning and (more importantly) that contribute to the implicit structures that determine the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of learning. The individual and collective desire to minimize conflict and difference and to emphasize togetherness may well get in the way of learning about power relations within organizations.

I think that we can also ask how what is embodied is also contested in the designs and opportunities for learning that are created in the context of HRD? The learning environment is contradictory, offering both opportunities to reinforce desired organizational identities and to contest them. It is through such contradictions that we will learn how to be effective in helping others to learn. I do not think that we can expect HRD to enhance the learning capacity of both individuals and organizations unless we engage critically with the ways in which everyday emotions and power relations undermine as well as support this aim.

Conclusion

The fact that the Editorial Team of HRDQ invited me to put forward the ideas and opinions within this essay suggests to me that I am not alone in believing that the interplay between emotion, power and HRD is an important future theme for HRD scholarship and for this journal. Part of the role of an Editorial Team is to shape the future agendas of research within a field of scholarship. I think that their vision for the 25th Anniversary Volume of HRDQ is an important act of leadership. I hope that we can all respond to their invitation and their challenge.

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